

THE JESTER'S MASQUERADE

By Cornelia Baker

"I AM going to turn over a new leaf," said Trico the jester to the King. "Oh, you needn't prepare to grin, for it is not my intention to say anything funny. I intend to stop being a fool; I am going to be wise."

"Trico," said his majesty thoughtfully, "you are growing morbid. I have noticed it for sometime. Why, you made a joke the other day—just wait a moment." He opened a book some three feet thick which lay on the table beside him, and with puckered brow ran his forefinger down several pages. "Ah, here it is!" he continued. "You made a joke the other day which was used by the Chinese over four thousand years ago. You have lost your levity, your jocularity, your vivacity, your blitheness, your sprightliness, your freshness, your er—er, what is the word I want?"

"I think it stood somewhere in the first row of the battalion, but you failed to notice it," replied Trico mournfully.

"At any rate," went on the King, "you have become as stupid as a fat friar."

"That is the limit, cousin. To think I should be compared to a cook!"

"Who is talking about a cook?"

"Isn't a cook a fat-fryer? Oh, dear, there I go again! I will be a fool in spite of myself." And he drew forth a large red-silk handkerchief and wept into it.

"There, there," said his majesty soothingly, handing the jester a well-filled purse. "Take that and one of the best horses in my stables and travel for a few months. Then you will return with your vivacity, your sprightliness, your er—er—"

"That's right," interrupted Trico. "Thanks, cousin. Good-by."

"I should be a fool indeed to travel in this fool's dress with all these jingling bells," thought Trico. "I shall search through the wardrobe of Sir Sabio the court poet for a costume that will be appropriate to my new character."

But much to his surprise and disgust he found that his fool's suit would not come off. Pull and tug as he would, it clung like the skin. So he slipped over it a long purple robe belonging to Sir Sabio and fastened down the front with little winged horses, then he placed on his head a tall pointed hat. But the bells on his jester's suit continued to make a noise—even his breathing causing them to tinkle melodiously. This would never do, so he was obliged to muffle them in cotton-wool tied on with strong thread, and finally equipped to his satisfaction Trico rode out of the palace gates appearing grave and wise.

At nightfall of the fifteenth day he arrived at a huge palace with an immense tower, so high that the top of it seemed to be lost in the mist of the clouds. The sentinel at the gate was not pacing back and forth as a well-trained sentinel should, but by the light of a flaming torch was scribbling wildly upon a dingy piece of paper.

"Will you kindly tell me the name of this palace?" asked Trico, touching him on the shoulder.

"Palace, Alice, make!" exclaimed the sentinel, springing to his feet.

"That's a queer name for it," observed Trico, passing on and sounding the knocker.

No one answered, and he pushed open the door and walked in. There were a number of servants about, but all were scribbling away as if for dear life and paid no attention to the new arrival.

"Tell me the name of your King, if you please," said the jester to no one in particular. They all sprang up and shouted: "Ease, freeze, freeze, cheese, sneeze!" and resuming their former positions continued to write.

"Is this a home for idiots?" asked the amazed Trico.

"Idiots, idiots," moaned the servants—"alas! there is no time for that word."

"There may not be a time for it, but I know people whom it fits like a glove," replied Trico, walking away with a half dozen rimes for "glove" ringing in his ears.

In a blue room he found a funny little man

dressed in blue who was writing so rapidly that blue sparks flew from his pen.

"See here, sir," said Trico, seizing him by the shoulder, "if you jump up and begin to scream rimes at me I will pitch you out of the window! I am Sir Sabio, the court poet of the great King Bombastious. I am traveling about for my health, and I want to ask you who owns this palace?"

The little man pulled himself away and pressed a number of buttons on the wall. Then with a polite bow he said: "This is the winter palace of her learned majesty the Queen Doctissima. She is a queen of many fads, the latest of which is an order issued this afternoon to the effect that everybody shall assemble in the throne-room to-night and each must read an original poem. He who fails to comply must pass a month in a most unpleasant dungeon. Her object is to encourage a love of learning in her realm. I was just adding the last line to my own verses when you entered, so my mind is at rest. You could not have arrived

seizes her you will have the pleasure of reciting an original poem every fifteen minutes."

Trico turned cold. He never had made a rime in his life, and here he was posing as a celebrated poet and would be compelled to exhibit his wares!

"Oh, you will have a lovely time!" went on the little man musingly. "She heaps favors upon learned people. She is as celebrated for her generosity in that respect as she is noted for her severity in dealing with impostors."

"Wh—wh—what does she do with impostors?" asked the trembling "poet."

The little man laughed lightly and drew his finger across his own throat in a gesture both suggestive and ghastly. Then he walked to the window, whistling carelessly.

Trico shivered and put his hand to his heart, for it seemed to him that the loud and energetic beating of that organ could be heard for at least a mile.

Something rattled in the inner pocket of his robe; it was a piece of paper, and he suddenly remembered that Sir Sabio had been in the habit of writing verses at all times and places, and that he often carried his productions in his pocket. He unfolded the paper with unsteady hands and found that it was in rime, but at the top of it was written: "Very poor, must destroy."

"Well, it's good enough for me," thought Trico gleefully. "It rimes, and that is all I ask just now."

The verses were entitled, "Do Not Say 'If,' But Say 'When,'" and the subject of which they treated was that a man who would succeed in life must never express a doubt of his ability by saying "if," but that he always must say "When I shall accomplish this or that." Trico was delighted thus to be lifted out of his difficulty, and as he followed the little man to the royal presence he cut a caper all by himself at a turn in the corridor, forgetting for the time that he was playing a new rôle, and that he was no longer a fool.

Queen Doctissima was seated on an ebony throne in the great tower. The walls on every side were covered with shelves which reached to the top. Huge books that a person of ordinary strength could not lift, tiny books which could be slipped into the waistcoat pocket, short fat books, long thin books, blue books, red books, yellow books, books of all shades and shapes, filled the shelves, for here were collected all the poetry books of the world. Standing on ladders were men constantly engaged in dusting them, some of the book-dusters being so high up that they resembled spiders, while their ladders near the top appeared as if they had dwindled into cobwebs.

The Queen was tall and pale. Her robe was of blue and silver, and she wore a crown of sapphires. On the back of her throne was perched a raven, which occasionally rubbed his shining head against her ear as if whispering to her. She greeted the poet most graciously, and said that she considered herself fortunate in being able to welcome him at this particular time when the Muses had been invoked by every soul beneath her roof.

A bell clanged, and the room soon was filled by a motley company of courtiers, ambassadors, officers and servants, each carrying from one to twenty sheets of paper, according to the length of the poem. Queen Doctissima made a speech, in which she stated that she could promise a treat as delightful as it was unexpected, for the great poet Sir Sabio was present, whose poem as the crowning gem should come last.

The first production was read by the prime minister, who seemed to be proud of it. There were seventy-nine stanzas, which he read with a maddening deliberation, and even the Queen drew a sigh of relief when he had finished. One after the other the remaining poems followed according to the station of the writer, and in most of them the rimes appeared to have been dragged in by the neck and forced to stand in their proper places.

When it came Trico's turn to read, the Queen



Then in a Deep Bass Voice He Read

at a more opportune time, my dear Sir Sabio, and her majesty will be delighted to welcome you and to hear some of the gems that must constantly be floating through your mind."

"You are very kind," replied Trico, who resolved to leave the palace at the earliest possible moment. "I should be delighted to recite some of these rimes and jingles which are forever whizzing through my head, but alas! in this cold world we often are deprived of our dearest joys, and I am obliged to take my departure at once, for I promised to meet a man at nine o'clock."

The little man grinned. "Probably you do not know that this is an enchanted spot which none may leave without the consent of the Queen. Loving poetry as she does, you may be assured that she will not permit a man of your reputation to leave the court in haste. In fact, I am quite sure that she will be determined to keep you here permanently."

"But she need not know that I am here."

"She already knows it. Did you not see me press those buttons a few moments ago? They informed her of your name and profession. But do not look so distressed. You will be fêted; you will have the best of everything, and if the fancy